

# Belonging Without Believing: religion, atheism and Islam today

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Book: 'Beyond the Divide: Religion and Atheism in Dialogue'.

## **15 Belonging without believing: Religion, atheism and Islam today**

*Dilwar Hussain*

This chapter takes as its starting point the growing phenomenon of people choosing no longer to believe in the religion of their heritage, in this case Islam. The data on religious identification shows how this is a significant issue in many European countries, some that have now gone beyond the 50 per cent threshold of people who do not express belief in a religion. In looking at some of the tensions this experience may create within debates on Islam, I was reflecting on Grace Davie's notion of 'believing without belonging', in her exploration of the transformation of Christianity and how people engage with it. I spoke at a conference a few years ago, when I deliberately changed that wording to talk about the need to find ways of 'belonging without believing'.

In contemporary debates around Islam in Western societies, often marred by politics of identity, one of the highly contentious issues that has emerged is the stigmatisation of people that leave their religion, to convert to another, or move to a position of agnosticism or atheism. This can become a serious concern with death threats, social isolation and a sense of being 'cut-off' from ones community, even family not unheard of. And yet the Qur'an asserts that, "there should be no compulsion in religion". At the end of the chapter I propose a framework for thinking about this tension further, but it raises the questions of the relationship between Islam and terms such as 'freedom' (of religion), 'humanism', 'secularism' and 'the secular'.

### **The Secular**

The Quran is a scripture held as a divine source of light by Muslims, yet it should not follow from there, in automatic fashion, that it is at odds with the secular. In fact the earthly life is strongly affirmed and one could actually say that in some ways Islam is a 'secular religion' in the sense that secular means temporal and earthly. One often finds references to focus the mind on both this life and the next:

*"And ordain for us good in the world and in the hereafter..." Qur'an 7:156*

The metaphor of human creation where Adam and Eve are sent to the earth, show the 'divine plan', that they have been created for a temporal, earthly, secular existence. This was not a 'fall', but the purpose all along (as discussed below).

The promise that ensues is that light, or inspiration, will be 'sent' from the numinous to the earthly. Accordingly, the stated purpose or use of this light is to work within a secular setting. The European memory of its history of religion is not often narrated as one of a complementing dimension, but more of as a 'run in' with, and that constraining

the force of religion was necessary for the expansion of secular, rational and scientific progress. To some secular reformers today, the Muslim world may often feel like that; the Quran can be read as an inoculation against the 'trappings of materialism'. But it can also be read as seeking a settlement on earth, fertilizing the expansion of worldly progress, being a part of, and not apart from, the life of this world. In fact, the Qur'an appears to challenge other religious communities that it considers to be too 'other worldly', saying: "O People of the Book, do not go to excesses in your religion." (Qur'an, 4:171)

Are these contrasting readings about the temporal existence – to ward off or to embrace – equally weighted in their claim? Both readings do at least exist and, across the passage of time, different Islamic sub-cultures have stressed one vision over the other.

## **Freedom**

Free will is the very essence of the human spirit. According to the narrative of the Qur'an, and its story of creation, it is free will that differentiated humanity at the point of creation. The story begins with an announcement of intention by God to the assembly of angels:

"I wish to place a vicegerent upon the earth..." (Qur'an, 2: 30)

The angels suggested that (as a result of free will) man would "cause mischief (on the earth) and shed blood," God replied, "I know that which you do not" – thus giving divine license to this unique aspect of humanity and acknowledging that while freedom may lead to corruption, it is only through the exercise of free choice that the human spirit can reach the heights for which it was intended. This free choice, therefore, must include within it the ability to say 'no', even to God. A forced faith, or even a forced (or 'enforced') practice of religion can only be an inferior version of that practice and temporal coercion can never truly convince the heart of a truth.

This is why the Qur'an asserts that there should be "no compulsion" in faith. The opportunity to believe can only be truly realised and valued when there is also an opportunity to disbelieve. Of course, no freedom is absolute and all those involved in the debates acknowledge the need for some laws and rules to regulate behaviour – otherwise there would be chaos. But such laws should be about preventing harm, rather than enforcing religious practice.

While Eastern traditions have tended to focus more on responsibility and duty than on freedom, the European experience has been the struggle to win precious freedoms from monarchs, aristocrats, the Church and others who wielded power – leaving Europeans with a particular penchant for the notions of individual freedoms and rights. It may be argued that Muslim notions of authority, hierarchy and respect tend to be romanticised, while Western conceptions of these values have come to be read with more sceptical undertones.

The notions of respect, for example, seem quite different. Muslims have learned to respect religious symbols and icons more than the people that follow those symbols - even though the Prophet Muhammad taught that the life of a single person is more precious than the most sacred site in Islam: "the Kaba, and all its surroundings". Yet today, an attack on the reputation of the Prophet or his family, or a holy site would cause outrage, but an attack on an ordinary Muslim may go unnoticed.

However, in the British climate of free speech, institutions and representatives of religion are often seen to be fair targets for ridicule, possibly because of the cynicism towards authority and power (especially of a religious nature), but laypeople are rarely subject to the same treatment. Our notions of freedom, and conversely of offence, are culturally contingent. They are not absolutes. The environment in Britain is one in which humour is often self-deprecating. Being able to laugh at oneself is a very British way of expressing self-confidence, and those unable to do so are seen to be nervous and possibly having something to hide.

With the exception of anti-democracy activists who decry the Western political slogans of freedom as an anti-Islam plot, even orthodox Muslims speak a language of freedoms – in the very least an appeal to a freedom to practice their religion. Traditionally, a language of 'rights' or of passive tolerance or 'live and let live', inspired by verses such as, "to your religion, to me mine" (Qur'an, 109:6) and a freedom to choose one's religion as part of God's design has emerged as the discourse. The tie-in of human "freedom" with a central Quranic verse yields a discourse around "freedom of religion" and, by extension, around a pseudo-human rights discourse. Atheism, for example, is thus framed as a choice. This does not alter the theological teachings around such a choice (that it falls short of recognising the gifts of God), but it does begin to reposition the social relationships that such an outlook can create. Furthermore, faith is seen as something that cannot be forced, it has to be a choice. Piety has to emerge from within and an attempt to feign it takes one towards the territory of hypocrisy, which is seen to be worse than open disbelief because it involves deception.

### **Humans before believers**

The voice of the Qur'an speaks to all human beings and one of the often-repeated configurations of its discourse is addressed to 'humanity/mankind'.

"O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (Not that you may despise each other)." (Qur'an 49:13).

Such a verse seems to indicate an inclusive vision of humanity, in which ethnic and religious differences are to be celebrated and seen as a form of enrichment. A yet more explicit verse says:

“To every one of you We have appointed a way and an open road. If God had willed, He would have made you one nation; but that He may try you in what has come to you. So be forward in good works; unto God shall you return, all together; and He will inform you about that in which you used to differ.” (Qur’an, 5:48).

One is thus acutely aware that this life is one in which differences may be manifest, but such differences should not become the source of contention and division, let alone hatred or violence. We are to live in humility, to carry out good works, and then when we return to God the truth claims of our positions will be finally resolved. Our focus in this life should therefore not be on judging others, but on our own performance.

Another verse talks of the important identity of being human and how that in itself carries a tremendous dignity: “We have conferred honour upon the Children of Adam...” (Qur’an, 17:70).

Belief in God was most often presumed in historical societies across the world, let alone the East. Early Islam encountered Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians (all three of whom were accepted as ‘people of the book’) and pagans but there is very little mention of encounter with atheism. Islamic history, therefore, provides little or no precedent for theological or social responses to Atheism. The Madinan charter shows that Muhammad’s instinct was to create a society where all the residents of the time were regarded as a single community (*ummah*), regardless of faith or belief.

### **Epistemological opening (and closing)**

In his work on humanism and Islam, Ebrahim Moosa (2011) discusses the role of critical Muslim thinkers and scholars in learning from a wide range of sources. It was because they were open to learning from the Graeco-Roman, Persian, Indian, Chinese and other sources of knowledge that the translation movement at the time of the Abbasid ‘House of Wisdom’ (*Bayt al-Hikma*) was able to be so creative. This era led to a vast step-up in Islamic thought that had an impact on wide range of scholarly disciplines including philosophy, science, mathematics, art and literature. Above all, one sees the tremendous role that reason played in Muslim thought at that time (and paved the way for influencing European thought).

To thinkers such as Miskawayh (d. 1030), the idea of *al-Insaniyya* (humanity / humanism) was the goal of an ethical outlook of Islam (Goodman, 2003). Miskawayh charted out a pre-modern notion of ‘evolution’ in which he advocated that energy was infused into matter, which developed into mineral form, then into vegetable matter, which progressed to lower life forms and eventually became higher life forms. Similar ideas were also shared by the earlier Ikhwan al-Safa, a secretive intellectual and spiritual order around the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

Some Muslim thinkers advanced the idea that there are two forms of revelation – the type that one can read as the ‘word of God’ (scripture), and the type that one can ‘read’

from the natural world all around us. The epistemological work of Ibn Sina (d. 1037) on the latter influenced the Andalusian Ibn Tufayl (d. 1185), who borrowed from Ibn Sina and wrote his own version of a fictional work, *Hayy ibn Yaqdhan*, which tells the story of a boy that grew up on a remote island without human contact and how he came to develop knowledge of the truth (of God) through reason. This work was translated into Latin by Edward Pococke in 1671 (under the title, *Philosophus Autodidactus*) and then into English by Simon Ockley in 1708 (entitled *The Improvement of Human Reason*). The text had a profound impact on, for example, Locke (d. 1704) (who was a student of Pococke) and his ideas around the *tabula rasa* as well as on the theories of empiricism that developed in Western thought.

The point here is to illustrate that at a time of an open embrace and engagement with humanity and diverse sources of knowledge, a creative and vibrant interchange and evolution of learning can take place. Yet, when defensiveness, suspicion of others, fear and mistrust set in – as one may argue is currently a challenge for Muslim thought – that vibrancy dissipates, leading to a downward spiral of fear, mistrust, and closing of doors. How then does one prepare to engage with the challenges that the modern world presents, including the challenge of modernity and secularisation and what these mean to a religion that feels (correctly, or incorrectly) under threat? There are some Muslim thinkers in the last century, such as Iqbal (d. 1938), who have taken on the mantle of open intellectual engagement with the philosophical world around them, but many more of such figures are needed. From the late nineteenth century one could hear calls for renewed thinking (*ijtihad*) and reform (*islah*) in the Muslim world. Iqbal played a significant role in helping Muslims think about the nature of the world after the demise of the Ottoman Empire and create a reasoned vision for a post-colonial society that could be based on a modern constitutional system.

## **Secularism**

We often hear that Islam has no sense of separation of ‘church and state’, that there is an absence of the teaching of ‘render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s’. But a close scrutiny of Islam, and the life of Muhammad, show that even in the teachings of someone that personified the ‘religious’ for Muslims, a compartmentalisation between ‘worldly matters’ and ‘religious matters’ was actually quite clear.

Muhammad once came across some people that were artificially pollinating palm trees. He disliked the idea and commented that it would be better not to do this. However, as result of following his advice, the harvest in the following year was poor. When the farmers complained to him, he openly admitted the limitation of his knowledge regarding secular affairs and said: “If a question relates to your worldly matters you would know better about it, but if it relates to your religion then it belongs to me” (hadith, *Sahih Muslim*).

In the early twentieth century preoccupation with the caliphate, the ‘Islamic state’ was seen as a symbol of Muslim unity and its restoration as vital in defending Muslim interests and procuring justice in a post-colonial context. However, in reality, there has

been a well-established normative distinction (albeit in premodern settings) between the temporal, sovereign authority and the institutions of religion in the Muslim world, with the latter mainly advocating autonomy and resenting their co-option by the state whenever that did happen. In *The Failure of Political Islam*, Olivier Roy (1994) argues that "a de facto separation between political power" of sultans and emirs and religious power of the caliph was "created and institutionalized ... as early as the end of the first century of the hegira". Roy points to an early separation of powers in which the state's religious functions and worldly administrative arms, including its systems of legal arbitration, were organised as distinct organs. Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905) asserted more than a century ago that Islam is not a theocracy and that there is a distinction between the 'religious' and 'worldly'.

With the immense disappointment of Muslims with the various national projects often couched (even if at times with little more than lip-service) in the name of Islam—Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iran, Sudan, Afghanistan, etc., there is a growing recognition that a liberal, secular democracy is a good model for ensuring accountable, open societies that can protect the rights of all citizens of the state.

This may go some way in explaining why Islamic parties contesting modern political debate through a democratic national election have historically fared very poorly, even in a country like Pakistan, which is arguably the only modern nation state to emerge as an independent Islamic country (though this is a contested description), and where the emotion of a Muslim identity runs deep, the most established and organised religious parties make little impact in their chief aim of forming a majority government. Cries of corruption and foul play among other factors are commonly cited as a reason, but any objective assessment of political (as opposed to moral) offerings points to stark and obvious limitations in the quest for government. In setting out the democratic case for government, religious parties have very little to offer by way of a secure economic policy, national aspiration or welfare reform.

The instinct of the demos, the national vote bank, is not to trust religious parties with the national purse anymore than they would with a surgical operation. Religion after all has always had a medicinal as well as a moral offering. Yet it would be considered absurd by most to leave an advanced physical ailment in the hands of religious teachers. The application of scientific disciplines to human affairs within the economically and socially advanced nations of the world is thus an emergent challenge to an Islamic thought that makes an inconsistent qualification of human progress, by embracing material scientific enquiry but resisting world advancement in the humanities. This dichotomy, already sensed by the Muslim populace, will inevitably have to give way to a more coherent approach.

Within the nation state, there is a growing, if unappreciated, list of Muslim majority countries that wear a secular political system on their sleeve. Turkey is routinely cited as the example, and it is significant in key ways, not least because it is within Europe and had a central role in the latter part of Islamic political history. But Turkey holds a strident narrative of its own enlightenment struggle and therefore presents a

contentious and questionable model of harmonising faith and secularism. In addition to Turkey, states which do not claim a religious name for their system, and can be considered as variants of a secular model for a Muslim majority population, include Albania, Azerbaijan, Burkina Faso, Chad, Gambia, Guinea, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Mali, Senegal, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Even within the largest Muslim populations, there are strong undertones of a secular approach to national governance. In Indonesia's five founding principles, the Pancasila, which forms the philosophical foundation of the nation state, is a confident attempt to 'square' secularism with a majority Islamic faith. Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world, and consists in fact of a multiplicity of distinct island cultures. The Pancasila is a concept that has invited differing opinions regarding its religiosity, but successive Indonesian leaders have shown it to be flexible enough to assert a strong secular dimension despite its first principle proclaiming belief in God (not "Allah" or "Islam") as the national faith. The Pancasila has allowed the largest Muslim population to assert itself as a country for Muslims but not an Islamic nation state, in a way that the second largest nation, Pakistan, has not been able to.

It is precisely around this question of the whole Pakistan "project" that the philosophical basis of Pakistan politics and the politics of its national identity revolve. The founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah (d. 1948) insisted on a white column on Pakistan's national flag, to symbolize its minority population of other faith communities as a clear indicator of purpose – indeed, within his immediate family there were cross-religious marriages that were free of family taboo. Twenty years after Pakistan was founded (Jinnah died a year after independence, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) emerged as a progressive socialist party. It began as a communist leaning political force in opposition to the then government's support for America, with strong socialist messages and goals. By the 1970s, its rallying cry of "Roti, Kapra aur Makan" (food, clothing and housing) saw it form a government on a secular base.

Pakistan and Indonesia then, represent large scale, complex examples of a popular will and a political determination to find a civil space for religious neutrality where the national framework is dominated by a single religion. Through their challenges and policy aims, and whilst they remain far from a religiously neutral base by Western standards, they do point to a quest for a modern existence where Islam can thrive as a religion and the state can thrive as a plural society.

However, the story is more complex than that; an absence of religious rule (and 'on paper' separation of religion and state) does not automatically imply genuine freedom and liberty, given the role of the military and authoritarian tendencies in many Muslim countries. Furthermore, 'secularism' in the Muslim world has, in the past, been associated with forced 'westernisation' (Turkey for example) and / or double standards (e.g. support for dictatorships). This means that Muslim publics are often very sceptical of the term 'secularism' (though as mentioned previously, not necessarily the notion of separation).



While advocating secularism, I am not for the disappearance of religion, nor for an anticlerical and closed-minded *laïcité* (see Birt and Hussain, 2011). Rather, I see secularism as a good way of managing the public debate and structuring society, especially where multiple religious, ideological and belief positions may collide. So there is a conversation to be had about the extent, nature and mode of religious presence in the public sphere. The differentiation made by Rowan Williams (2006) between procedural secularism and programmatic (anti-clerical secularism) is a helpful one here. Given the plural nature of that presence perhaps the Rawlsian notion of ‘public reason’ (1999) can help—especially in a culture of very low religious literacy? But it seems that we also need to reach a point where religious voices can be given consideration and not automatically disregarded as ‘superstitious’.

## Conclusion

We have looked at some of the ideas that could be important building blocks within Muslim thought for a more nuanced and compassionate interaction between people that find themselves on different sides of the religion and atheism divide. Based on this, we can see that some of the potential areas of tension can be negotiated by using resources that are deeply embedded in the Muslim heritage and tradition. The idea of whether a person is free to believe or not believe; the choice of how much they should observe if they believe; the notion of fundamental human rights and equality of human beings; non-discrimination of people on the basis of their religious identity; how a secular society can both protect religions and the rights of individuals; the use of reason in the interpretation of sacred texts to allow for more contextually rooted religious discourses – all these are based on traditional views, but can also lay the ground for a set of open and inclusive interpretations of Islam that can help to look ahead to meet the challenges we face in society.

The Western world is home not just to significant numbers of Muslims, but also significant subgroups of Muslims. There is no such thing as a singular ‘Muslim community’. Within that diversity, a wide spectrum of religious practice can be found in a very dynamic landscape that has come to represent ‘Muslim identity’. The idea that belonging, being part of something, is based on a common and shared belief may be a useful one, but in my view it is not enough in the very complex, hyper-diversity that we live in today.

The greatest challenge of the future is about how we live with difference, not how we promote similarity. Such a future has an amazingly bright and exciting prospect, but it needs to be based on a sense of openness, compassion and respect that allows people to be themselves, without judgment, without prejudice, without pigeonholes. I am passionate about my beliefs. And part of that belief is that we need spaces where I, and others who may not believe in the way that I do, or choose not to believe in anything ‘religious’, can share a sense of belonging, commonality and mutuality. Before we are believers, we are human. There is a distinction between ‘being’ and ‘believing’. And we need to find ways in which we can *be* human together, even if we don’t *believe* together.

*"Shall I tell you what is better than much prayer and charity?" They said, "Yes." He said, "mending discord between people. And beware of hatred - it strips away your religion." (Hadith, Muwatta Imam Malik)*

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